

Ijoid in Niger-Congo: A review of the evidence

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Within African language classification, and of Niger-Congo in particular, the Ijoid languages constitute something of a puzzle. Ijoid is a small family, comprising two main branches: Defaka as the sole member of one branch and the Ijò language cluster constituting the other. Geographically, the Ijoid languages are confined to a relatively small region, the Niger Delta of southeastern Nigeria, where they are enclaved by Benue-Congo languages. Structurally, they show a number of features unattested in other languages of the region, such as dominant SAOVM word order and the presence of a gender distinction in the pronominal system. As Williamson & Blench (2000: 22) point out, while “Ijoid is closely related internally, it is very distinct from all other Niger-Congo families.” Despite this widely acknowledged characterization, the case, not only for Ijoid’s place within Niger-Congo but indeed its actual affiliation with Niger-Congo, has never been satisfactorily argued. It was considered part of Kwa, though with some reservations, by both Westermann (1927) and Greenberg (1963), and Stewart (1971) accepts this view with little comment. Williamson (1971) is somewhat more circumspect; she draws attention to cognates between Ijò, Yoruba, and Bantu, implicitly offering these as evidence of Ijoid’s inclusion in Niger-Congo, but goes on to say that “until reconstructions in greater time depth have been made ... it is probably not possible to classify Ijò in greater detail” (1971: 281). Since that time, the Ijoid languages have generally been considered a distinct branch of Niger-Congo, separating at a remote point. Williamson & Blench (2000) include an Ijò-Congo node after the earlier branching of only Kordofanian, Atlantic and Mande. No further evidence for its inclusion within Niger-Congo has been published, though Dimmendaal (2008) refers to their “principled status as members of the Niger-Congo family”. Güldemann (2008: 176), on the other hand, does not recognize Ijoid, along with Kordofanian, Atlantic, Mande and Dogon, as “established members” of Niger-Congo. In this paper I present a critical review of the various proposed classifications of Ijoid and the evidence adduced, with a view to establishing a firmer foundation for the classification of the group.

References

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